

TRANSCRIPT

Why close customer relationships will never go out of style

Podcast interview with Cris Thompson, Owner of Boliwalou; and Janelle Kozyra, member of Kimco Realty's blogging team

Janelle: Hello everyone. I am Janelle Kozyra, a member of Kimco Realty's blogging team. Today we have with us Cris Thompson, who is the owner of a very unique consignment store in a Kimco shopping center. She is located at the Kings Contrivance Village Center in Columbia, Md.

The name of Cris' store is Boliwalou, and she is about to tell us the meaning of this term because it is a very unique name and there's a very unique concept behind it. So Cris, it's great to have you with us. Thanks for joining.

Cris: Thanks for having me. So Boliwalou is a concept as well as it has a definition behind it. So I came up with the name because I wanted the idea of something that was very ethnic, very global, that seemed like it belonged to anybody in the world, yet we couldn't pinpoint a place in the world where it came from.

And the actual name originated from a book by Dr. Seuss called "I Had Trouble Getting to Solla Sollew." And the story is of this creature who decides to leave his place of residence to go live in Solla Sollew because his life's going to be so much better in Solla Sollew and of course he goes through all these trials and tribulations, and gets to Solla Sollew and realizes that his life is no better there; that it doesn't matter where you live, it is who you are.

So the concept, the idea of as women—because Boliwalou is a store for women—we go through this journey through life and we can accept ourselves at each and every stage of that, is really important to me. And so I had this name, Solla Sollew, and I played with consonants until I got to Boliwalou. The definition of the word itself is to dress or adorn yourself as a mode of self-expression.

A lot of consignment shops these days are looking for what's trendiest. So they're looking for clothing that has been seen in the stores in the malls in the past two years. That is not what I'm looking for. I mean I have those items, too. Don't get me wrong. But I love getting the quirky items.

I love it that several of my consigners travel to Europe and bring me items that you just haven't seen before, that somebody's going to come in and they're going to be the only one in Columbia wearing that item. Because what fashion dictates is that we present ourselves in a certain way according to a certain box, and I think that as women, the more that we get out of that box and be true to ourselves, the better off we'll be in our journeys.

Janelle: So at what point did you realize that you want to put a store behind this concept?

Cris: You know, that is such an interesting question because I get all the time, "Oh, was this always your dream? Is this something that you wanted to do?" No, this was something that was put in my life by God. I'm a very spiritual person.

I had a friend who a couple years back suggested the store to me. I was going through a phase in my life where I was ready for some transitions. I was ready for some big changes, and I just kind of went with the flow. It was never a dream. I've never been a fashion person. My friend used to tell me that she was going to sign me up for "What Not to Wear," because all I ever wore was shades of grey—the grey t-shirt with the grey yoga pants with the grey sneakers.

So I never thought of being in fashion and opening up a store at all. It was really just a series of events where a friend of mine had contacted several of us that were in a play group together, and suggested it to us. Two of us went on board with her, and at the end, the two friends decided not to go through with it and I decided to go ahead.

We did research for almost two years before we opened. But it was in June of 2011 that I decided to go ahead, and in September, I opened my doors. It was a huge step of faith that this was where I belonged and that this was what I was going to try to do at that point in my life.

Janelle: And then on the other side of the equation, there's also the reality of the business equation, where you also need to select a good location for all of this. So what kind of went into that decision and how did you pick the Kings Contrivance Village Center as the right location for you?

Cris: Absolutely. And the business end of it has been a huge learning curve for me. The location is fabulous. I love that village center. I have CVS next door, where people can drop off a prescription and then come shop for half an hour while they wait for it. There are all the restaurants.

There are offices upstairs where people come, drop off a family member for a dental appointment or something, and come down and shop while they're waiting, or who go for their own dental appointment. I have the visitors who come every six months. I have my weekly visitors, too, but who have a variety of different engagements in the village center. The foot traffic is fabulous.

It's funny because my attempts at marketing, whether they be print, online, have not been that great at getting people into the store. But word of mouth and foot traffic has really been what has made my client base as large as it is today. So it really is a great little center. And it's got the little fountain in the center with the tables so people come, and in the summertime we have live music. So it really is a place where people like to come and congregate.

Janelle: So let's talk a little bit more about what your customers are finding when they come to Boliwalou, because you mentioned before it's off-the-beaten-path fashion. So can you tell us a little bit more about that?

Cris: Absolutely. They're going to find the traditional stuff, too. Don't get me wrong. I have a lot of Ann Taylor, a lot of Chico's. Those are things that women like. They're brands and styles that people have come to rely upon. I have Coach purses, Dooney & Bourke. Again, things that people seek out.

But then I also have, like I said, a lot of items from Europe. I have a lot of Zara. I bring in unique items—jackets from England, Irish sweaters. Every winter I make sure I have some knit Irish sweaters. Those bring people in. I have my tacky Christmas sweaters, too, so plenty of those in stock for the Christmas parties.

I carry quite a bit of jewelry. My jewelry comes from three different sources. I have jewelry that's made by local artisans. And they all have different styles, all the way from 19-year-old Rachel, a student at Howard Community College who does a lot steam punk and a lot of really creative—I mean she makes her own beads out of clay and just really fantastic things. All the way to retired Louise, who is a home health aide and makes things with really high quality stone.

I also carry Fair Trade items. Now Fair Trade, a lot of people aren't familiar with it, is an organization that connects artisans in third-world countries with buyers in the first-world countries, without all the middlemen in between, so that the artisans get paid fair wages and are able to have a home, send their kids to school. Their kids can go to school with socks, I mean, just they're really able to have a lifestyle that they would not otherwise be able to have when they're being paid pennies.

And then the third source of jewelry is China. I do have some of those items that are very popular and those tend to be the ones that are the trendy jewelry. You're able to mix it, put it together with your own outfits and be able to create your own look.

Janelle: Is there anything in particular that you're looking for right now to offer in your store, maybe in preparation for the fall or back-to-school or anything along those lines?

Cris: Right now, we're actually not accepting anything on consignment. We're getting ready for summer clearance and then we'll start with the fall in a few weeks. For the fall, we're going to be getting the usual—the denim, the jeans. People always come in looking for jeans with little jackets, blouses, tops. [That's] what sells best at Boliwalou.

We do keep up with what's going on, with what's expected in the fashion industry in the fall. But really consignment is such a hodge-podge. It's almost like Christmas morning for me when people bring things in. You never know what you're going to find and what's going to be interesting.

I have people who bring in, I mean I had this summer this fantastic vintage dress from the 1950s, and you know they're vintage when they're marked a size 10 and they look like they could barely fit a size 4. But with embroidered jewelry and embroidered jewels, just like what you were seeing in the magazines, what you were seeing in the stores, except that this was the real thing. It looked like something Jackie O would have worn. So those are unique pieces that are always surprising when they come in.

So is there something I'm really looking for? Never, really. And I get asked this all the time. They'll watch the show on Bravo and say, "Oh I was watching the show about consignment shops. Is that what it's like to run one?" And not at all. It's not, oh we must have this piece in the store, or that other piece. It's so exciting to have that. I'm going to seek that out.

I'm looking to please my customers. I'm all about customer service. I want them to come in and be excited and see things that they're going to like. So when people bring things in, I'm examining those items with that in mind.

Janelle: So Cris, you've been open for almost two years now. Looking back over those two years, what do you think has kept you going from an entrepreneurial perspective?

Cris: What has kept me going? I think my customers. But it's been really—I say all the time it takes a village, and I've said even to my customer base, my email base, that it takes a village to raise a boutique.

I think that I've maintained really open communication with my customers. I believe in fantastic customer service.

If somebody comes in and a piece of jewelry has broken, we'll either repair it, give them another one, or give them a refund, whichever option they choose. We apologize for our mistakes and we go above and beyond to do what we can for the customer. And my customers respond to that and they'll let me know. I think I have a really good open relationship with them. They come in and they know they can tell me how they feel if there's something they don't like.

I say all the time that one day I'll be on the cover of Forbes magazine, having a conversation about how you can have a business with a conscience. But not just in terms of—I'm talking about the Fair Trade conscience, though I have that, too—but the idea that these are people who are electing to be in my store to spend their money with me, rather than other places.

Part of it is that yeah, some of the deals I'm offering are much better than what you can find in other stores. Yes, you can go buy a piece of jewelry in a different store that I might be charging \$15 for, but chances are the five-buck one's going to break and mine isn't. Or if mine does, I'll fix it for you.

But again, it's that idea of, I learn as many names as I can. I know people's stories. People know my story. And it's a relationship. It really is a relationship that I forged with people. It's so counterintuitive because I think what we learn in business is that it's number crunching, and number crunching does occur. I mean I obviously keep a very close eye on that.

I've worked at becoming more efficient in what I do. I mean when I compare myself to two years ago, and I think, OK, it's a good thing that I'm writing a handbook now on how to do this and not two years ago, because I've learned so much as to how to produce more, to get more items on my sales floor.

And I get that all the time. I get people who come in and say, "Wow, I was here two years ago and it's so different." It is. Between merchandising and just increasing the use of my space, because it's a tiny, tiny store. It's got to be the smallest space Kimco has anywhere in the country, I think, my little shop. So making a better use of that. So I've done quite a bit of different things to try to increase revenue.

But I think the bottom line is, I've developed that relationship, and that relationship keeps people coming back. We're in a place I think in history now where yes the giants are out there and people are still going to continue shopping at Walmart and shopping at the mall and looking for things like that.

But they're much more conscientious of how they spend their money. They might think twice before going out and buying a brand new Dooney & Bourke purse knowing they can get one in just as good condition at a consignment shop for half the price or a third of the price. So as long as I maintain that relationship with the people I serve, I think that from an entrepreneurial perspective, the business will grow.

Janelle: Great, Cris. That was really great talking with you and thank you so much for sharing your business story with us. Really interesting.

Cris: Thank you.

Janelle: And we wish you continued success there in Columbia, Md.

Cris: Thank you so much.

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